



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Teorema by Pier Paolo Pasolini; Franco Rosselli; Monolo Bolognini
Robert Chappetta

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= REVIEWS

Dennis
Hopper and
Peter
Fonda in
EASY RIDER

some criticism of the individualist ethic the cyclists have lived and will die by.

The film's one weakness is the mystical tone that overlies some parts of it (was the country ever the tolerant place the script imagines?) and the romantic gloss given to a couple of the episodes, notably the farm lunch and commune episodes. The commune-dwellers are too uniformly clean, friendly, well-housed, and pious to be true; and the mime troupe which suddenly appears is not only implausible but also faintly embarrassing: a bit of Los Angeles "culture" worked up for the commune sequence, which seems to have been shot somewhere in the LA hills.

Wyatt himself radiates this romantic aura, but Peter Fonda brings the part off so that the character is appealing rather than offensive. Lonely, driven, yet kind and generous to strangers, he is a modern variation of the classical frontier hero and not so very far from characters Henry Fonda used to play. If instead of a white Stetson he wears a red-white-and-blue crash helmet, this chiefly indicates a change in forms of locomotion. More significant of changing times is the fact that his quest leads him to the east instead of to the west, and that violence and death come from the longer-established settlers rather than from the Indians, Mexicans, or nouveaux-tribesmen of the commune.

Easy Rider is a film which will probably be appreciated by many people for the wrong reasons. The squares will come for the sensationalism of pot-smoking and naked hippies; the hippies will come to see their stereotypes about cops and southerners reinforced; and everybody who loved *A Man and a Woman* will come for the lapses into facile loveliness of open roads in the photography. Nonetheless, *Easy Rider* is an important film for our time, one of the few that shows America as it is today.

—HARRIET R. POLT

TEOREMA

Script and direction: Pier Paolo Pasolini. Photography: Giuseppe Russolini. Music: Ennio Morricone. Produced by Franco Rosselli and Monolo Bolognini.

"The lost are like this, and their scourge to be As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse."

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

Teorema is one of those peculiar, bad, yet original movies which intrigue movie buffs by their very impurity. Pasolini's metaphoric images are often static and uncinematically developed, but they have a content more memorable than

those of more cinematic films like *Point Blank*, in which the abstractly sensuous use of the medium is often dazzling but finally empty. Pasolini's title, *Teorema*, underlines his didactic intentions: to demonstrate poetically the spiritual squalor of the bourgeoisie; and, like Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, to provoke the audience to commitment by showing it alienation. In its bourgeois family, *Teorema* has four de Sades for its images of alienation, and in the family maid, one saint as its Marat sacred figure. But Pasolini's sense of commitment is not so simple as Weiss's, and Pasolini's use of Artaud's ideas makes *Teorema* a richer kind of failure than *Marat/Sade*. Although *Teorema* fails, part of it fails strikingly: toward poetry not of words but images, and a tragedy not of characters but presences—who, though real and immediate, shake us with their strangeness, and who act out, beyond well-plotted narrative, frightening but beautiful dreams.

Pasolini's film poetry comes out of neorealism. *Teorema* is shot in a direct, unadorned style, and like past neorealist films, it deals with contemporary reality from a left-wing political vantage. No longer, however, is the focus of advanced Italian film-makers on the working class or the poor, the sympathetic victims of Zavattini's scripts, but the class from which the directors come, the bourgeoisie, which they may depict with either an acid detachment, as in Bellocchio's *China Is Near*, or a lyric irony, as in Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution*. Pasolini has tried in part to use his own homosexual neurosis as a metaphor for the anomie of the bourgeoisie: in *Teorema*, the bourgeois family is not a family, but a collection of atoms, each going on its own anguished path alone and apart from the others. And the film itself—though it was mainly shot out of doors, naturally, in both sunlight and overcast sky—has, with its sparseness of dialogue, and slowness of action, a dream-like aura. And in its metaphysical anguish, its sense of blocked vistas, its mixture of modern and classical allusions, it recalls de Chirico's paintings—with their mannequin figures driven by a rage of restlessness from their stillness.

What is not neorealist in *Teorema* is Pasolini's use of the classic past. Seeing the movie is meant to be a religious experience as it was for the Greeks watching tragedy: the catharsis—or, in *Teorema*, the purgative sense of alienation—is to come through one household or family. As we experience the anxiety and disorder of the bourgeois family, in some of its guises—art, sex, and madness—and at the end, in the void of the volcanic desert itself, we are meant to be moved, to feel their anguish, and be purged. In so far as Pasolini draws upon the classic past, the sense of tragedy largely does not work. Can a bourgeois family merely by being representative have the stature of the House of Atreus? The fall from bourgeois contentment more readily evokes laughter than pity or terror, as evidenced by Bellocchio's satire, *China Is Near*. (Bellocchio's first film, *Fist in the Pocket*, though more like *Teorema* in its gothic frenzy, also has humorous overtones, black and Buñuel-like.) At the beginning of the film, Pasolini tries to give us a sense of the family's status, if not their stature: we see the children going to the best schools, and jerkily edited shots of the source of the family wealth, the family factory. But to show the family as representatively affluent is to make them blank and lacking in mythic resonance. More effective is the neorealist device of a media newsman seeking the workers' reactions to the gift of the family factory. This interview, which sets the main action of the film back in time, gives us a sense that the destiny of the bourgeois family is already fated: once the visiting god had come, its tragic suffering was ineluctable. Yet whatever force their suffering has for us is Artaud-like, more like litany than classic tragedy: Can a bourgeois . . . (father, son, mother, daughter) cope with the power of the divine? With the power of the divine, a bourgeois . . . (father, son, mother, daughter) can not cope.

The visiting god of *Teorema* is a cunning reversal of the traditional Christ-figure returning to earth: it is the bourgeois family, not "Christ," who this time is "crucified" or alienated. Like the God of the Old Testament, at least as Pasolini has conceived him, the visitor

has come, not merely to comfort his chosen people, but to shake them up, radically—with a carnal knowledge of the divine. Aside from the maid, the carnal knowledge is as traumatic for the bourgeois household as it was for Oedipus to lie with his mother. The trauma does, however, arouse the family members from the false tranquillity of their everyday lives, and brings them an increase of consciousness. “Sex” is here being used as a metaphor for a concrete, transcendental mode of knowing, as “knowing” has traditionally been used as a metaphor for sex. Since the holy is ineffable, it must be conveyed, as Pasolini has said, beyond language, signs and symbols, concretely, as in sexual experience. The actual handling of the sexual encounters, however, is ritualized and robbed of sensuousness. For example: while the servant lies on the bed, only half-revived from her suicide attempt and looking like Mantegna’s *Dead Christ*, the god lies limply on top of her fully clothed, to “resurrect” her, in what seems more an extreme case of Caritas or Christian charity than the physical act of love. The “sex” should have had the sensuousness, say of Titian, if not the sexual ecstasy of Bernini’s statues, like *The Vision of St. Theresa*. Or, at the very least, the earthiness of the fat whore, Wanda, in *Nights of Cabiria*—for though Pasolini uses sex as a metaphor for the holy, sex in itself does not seem holy to Pasolini. If the bourgeois wife is at fault for reducing love to sexuality, Pasolini seems to me to be at fault in excluding real sexuality from spiritual love. Pasolini is more effective in conjuring up, Artaud-like, disturbing images of nymphomania and homosexuality, intended to shake up the bourgeois audience as the visiting god shakes up the bourgeois family.

In outward appearance, the visiting god, played by Terence Stamp, has the peculiar smile, calmness, and lean muscularity of archaic Greek statues. His sparring with the father, and his racing of the family dog also suggest a youthful springiness. With his entrance scene, Pasolini makes two contrasting little jokes. Near the beginning, for a short stretch the film is in black and white, and Stamp’s entrance scene

wittily brings color back into the film, as if he were indeed some kind of god. On the other hand, the dialogue that greets his presence points to his human shape: in the only bit of English in the film, an allusion perhaps to Stamp’s nationality, a guest asks, “Who is that boy?”. The daughter shrugs and answers equivocally, “A boy . . .” Although Stamp is too old for the part, he is, I think, meant to suggest “a boy” or young man as in the archaic Greek statues. Further, Pasolini’s repeated crotch shots of Stamp, if limp and desexualized as the god’s sexual encounters, suggest a homoerotic idealization of the male figure. The son anguishedly compares his undeveloped body with Stamp’s and his sense of inadequacy drives him to self-loathing queerness. The god’s reading to the father from Rimbaud recalls the homoerotic relationship of Verlaine and Rimbaud, the foolish virgin and the infernal bridegroom. Even the nymphomania of the wife, played by Silvana Mangano—now stylishly slim, no longer the voluptuous figure of *Bitter Rice*—is on the homoerotic model of a furtive and restless search. Each member of the bourgeois family exemplifies Plato’s myth of recollection: the ideal once having been experienced, each is driven to search for what each had concretely if too briefly known. As Santayana has said: to love things as they are is to make a mockery of them.

Although some of Pasolini’s images are striking, his clumsy handling of the medium weakens their effectiveness. Even a non-auteur director, say W. S. Van Dyke, who shot such films as *San Francisco* with peremptory speed, had a sure and graceful flow of images lacking in *Teorema*. This unsureness in the use of the medium, coupled with an anxiety about communicating his points, leads to one of Pasolini’s worst faults: an overseriousness of tone. To underline the theme of death-in-life, Pasolini repeatedly uses excerpts from Mozart’s *Requiem* as heavyhandedly as Hollywood mood music. To show that they are suffering terribly, Pasolini has his actors emit absurd little cries of anguish. And to make clear that bourgeois life

is a wasteland, Pasolini mechanically inserts repeated shots of the volcanic desert, with Biblical quotations as graffiti of doom. The cries of anguish and the shots of the desert are largely unnecessary as preparation for the final images, nor do they work in themselves as poetic effects. Whether intentionally or not, simple, mechanical repetition in movies is likely to have a comic effect. Repetition of motif is better done musically, as variations on a theme, as in Antonioni's *Blow Up*, a playful and intricate symphony of useless, mock and uncompleted actions: the hero fights for the broken guitar, orders a meal he doesn't stay for, asks a girl to call him back and then has nothing to say. Unlike Antonioni, Pasolini has failed to work out some of his sub-themes and especially the details of the action with the same sense of musical variation. Even without a more varied use of motifs, Pasolini's effects could have been considerably toned down and better orchestrated.

The device of the visiting god enables Pasolini to give a loose structure to the film without having a detailed narrative, and to emphasize the images rather than the story. Directly, the god brings to consciousness what is buried inside the characters, fantasy material that would not otherwise be acted out. Other Italian directors have used parallel devices: Bertolucci, the "double" in *Partner*; and Bellocchio, metaphoric epilepsy in *Fist in the Pocket*. In *Teorema*, the fantasy material seems less personal in that it is more conventionalized and clearly metaphoric. A partial exception is the wife's pickup sequences, in which Pasolini displays a homoerotic lyrical feeling, as in the shots of a nude male sleeping, his hands over his genitals like a Venus of Modesty. It would be wrong to say, however, that the wife's pickup scenes are merely a masquerade for homosexual encounters. Such reductionism doesn't respect the very real sensual reality of surfaces, for it were a man rather than a woman picking up the young men, we would not experience the episode in the same way. To that extent, then, even these pickup scenes are conventionalized. In any case, the theme of masquerade is integral to the film.

The women in the film hide behind some sort of mask: the daughter, played by Anne Wiazemski, wears a blank, plain look; the maid, Laura Betti, a marvelously impassive face; and the wife, Silvana Mangano, her usual movie star make-up (which Mangano satirizes in Visconti's episode, *The Witch Burned Alive*, in the anthology film, *The Witches*). Whatever identity a woman may have is hidden, and some may have no identity at all; which is, I think, expressed in the extreme metaphor of the daughter's catatonic state. What Pasolini shows as alternatives for women is narrow even for Italian society: withdrawal, promiscuity, or sainthood.

After the visiting god departs, the fates of the four members of the bourgeois family are intercut and counterpointed with that of the servant who becomes a saint. The blank, white walls of the daughter's room where she lies in a catatonic state contrast sharply with the rich and irregular forms of the village to which the servant returns. One can almost touch the uneven, slanting roofs and the worn walls, with their patches of brick showing through. While the daughter's scenes are necessarily indoors, the maid's are attractively shot outside where, in addition, crowds can form to give us a sense of community. Although the maid, like the daughter, seems at first to be in a comatose state, within her there is not a blankness but the old peasant myths that allow her to transcend herself as an individual. Admittedly, Pasolini does have a real feeling for landscape and the picturesqueness of rural poverty, but his sense of the miraculous, and of the power of peasant myths, is as over-conventionalized and lifeless as the works of art in most American Catholic churches (whose taste reflects that of the European peasantry who came here, rather than that of the ruling classes who stayed behind). What Pasolini is saying may be true—my grandmother, of Southern Italian peasant stock, was sustained to a very ripe age by the old myths—but, in *Teorema*, the old myths no longer have the power of art.

The maid's last sequence is a foil for the father's, the final images of the film. After hav-

ing risen over the roofs of the village, the servant-saint, with an unwitting sense of Marxist dialectic, asks to be buried in earth, with her eyes uncovered, near a new housing site. Although the sense of the sacred may be buried within us all, the maid's burial more specifically represents the sense of the sacred buried within the working class and peasantry: through the earth, the eyes look out and tears renew the ground. By contrast, the father wanders in a desert, where no buildings are, dry as volcanic ash. The maid is in purgatory; the father, in hell.

The final images of the film—the father wandering, hairy and naked, alone in a shadow-swept desert, screaming—though distinctively Pasolini's in style, have their source in both Tolstoi and Francis Bacon. In Tolstoi's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, though Ivan Ilych screams in agony the last three days of his life, he had achieved an inner peace. Unlike Ivan Ilych, the father does not achieve any peace; yet, as evidenced by the gift of the factory to the workers, in his dissolution he does attain some sort of humanity. What we do not get, however, is the feeling of compassion and renewal Tolstoi gives us; whatever sense of renewal there is in the maid's sequence does not carry over to this one. The force of Pasolini's images is more like that of Bacon's paintings, which Pasolini uses, though not for compositional or formal effects (he is not a painterly film-maker), but for their castration-obsessed content. The symbol of castration or crucifixion occurs in several of Pasolini's films: in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, the Christ is so prissy and arrogant he seems to be asking to be crucified; and in *Accatone*, the death or "crucifixion" of the hero seems merely contrived. In *Teorema*, the castration image is given to us more directly and powerfully. As in Bacon's Pope paintings, and Tolstoi's *Death of Ivan Ilych*, Pasolini has given us as Victim not one of Zavattini's poor, but a figure from the exploiting class. Pasolini's screaming factory-owner father has less to do with Marx than Freud: the castration of an authority figure is more terrifying than one of the exploited. It is Pasolini's most effectively

used image, and the only one that, in terror if not in pity, recalls the classic sense of tragedy.

On the whole, however, Pasolini's natural gift may be less for tragedy than for humor. In *Teorema*, the most likable sequence is that of the struggle of the bourgeois son to be an artist; and in the otherwise poor anthology film, *The Witches*, only Pasolini's episode, *The Earth As Seen from the Moon*, with Toto, in the style of silent film comedy, is any good. Pasolini's sense of humor seems more complex and generous than his sense of tragedy, which is often too mechanical, lacking the manic sense of discovery of Bertolucci's *Partner*. What is good about the son's sequence is that even in his anguish, there is something sympathetically spontaneous and playful—as in that natural act and logical extension of abstract expressionist body gestures in paint. Pasolini, to be sure, disapproves of his lack of seriousness, as reflected in the last shot of the sequence in which the boy turns glumly away from a failed drip painting on the wall. Still, as the short, skinny, freckled son, played by Jose Cruz Soublette, mocks himself, there is in his voice real feeling and resonance. If, in his lack of the sense of the sacred, the son can only profane, his profanity is richer in feeling than the anguish of the other bourgeois family members.

Teorema's real importance is as part of a resurgence of Italian films, marked by this tendency to extreme or odd metaphor—Bellocchio's *Fist in the Pocket*, Bertolucci's *Partner*, and Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. (The rather odd disappearing corpse in *Blow-Up*, I take to be a *memento mori*, intended to shake up the pleasure-seeking, restless hero, and to give him, as in the final distancing shot, pause). These works recall surrealism without actually being surrealist, for though they have moved a considerable way from neorealism, their metaphoric wildness is contained within a loose but natural frame. Perhaps "neosurrealist" would be a better word. However flawed, *Teorema* suggests strongly the possibilities of such a neosurrealist cinema. And in the best neosurrealist work so far, Bertolucci's *Partner*, which has not been

released in the United States at the time of this writing, there is a shadowy lyricism, a poetry of both the fantastic and the natural, that is both uniquely Italian and uniquely cinematic.

—ROBERT CHAPPETTA

LE SOCRATE

Written and directed by Robert Lapoujade. Photography: Jean-Jacques Renon. Music: Bernard Palmegiani. New Yorker Films.

What is pleasing about *Le Socrate* is that it arises not so much out of other films, but, like Cocteau's work, out of broader movements of art in general. As such, Lapoujade is as subversive in form as he is in his rejection of the conventional screen image, eschewing both conventional storytelling and the New Wave habit of dressing an avant-garde narrative in some more traditional garb (e.g., *Band of Outsiders* as a gangster picture, *The Bride Wore Black* as suspense drama, or the Czech *Firemen's Ball* as neorealist comedy.) Indeed, construction-wise, Lapoujade film is perhaps closest to pre-*Petulia* Lester, being, to stretch an analogy, a ninety-minute, semi-abstract, partially animated experimental short, to Lester's ninety-minute TV commercials.

What there is of story is hardly remarkable, a sort of *chichi*, typically French parable on individuality and philosophy, the police mentality, role-playing, and most of the accompanying fashionable themes which, perhaps not without justification, comprise today's intellectual's reservoir of profundity. In outline and on the surface it goes something like this, calling to mind the pseudo-poetic plotting used in works like *Vertigo* or *Sundays and Cybele*: Policeman tails mysterious person, an unorthodox but precious relationship develops between the two, outsiders do not understand and destroy the relationship. Yet the person tailed here is a philosopher rather than a standard pretty girl, the relationship is intellectual rather than emotional, and our sorrow is not for stifled love but for stifled ideas.

The story is, however, surprisingly sufficient to carry the movie. *Le Socrate* (played by a hard, square-faced, gray-haired Pierre Luzan) and Lemay, the mustachioed police inspector (R. J. Chauffard) develop not only thematically but comically. Whether indulging in projected nuclear war, rearranging the geology of the earth, pantomiming an existence as circus animals, or just lying in the sun, their little charades are funny, but also wise and winking, like an existential Laurel and Hardy. In contrast, the picture's love interest is brooding and neurotic. Lemay's daughter Sylvie (Martine Brochard), a pretty but unremarkable girl, has broken up with Adam (Jean-Pierre Sentirer), presumably a stage director, in favor of an equally unremarkable Pierre (Stephane Fäy). Adam is a dark-haired, sunken-eyed, black-turtleneck type who demands his love directly and rudely. Strangely enough we side with him rather than Pierre, for the two lovers' self-absorption seems callous and isolated; they do a lot of walking in the woods but their attraction seems banal; we sense that somehow their love has left them short-sighted and less self-aware, that it is merely a product of the mediocre world around them. Perhaps it is because they are lovers with so little personality beyond their love; they are, in themselves, boring to outsiders. It is logical, then, that Sylvie's lover is *Le Socrate's* downfall. Worried about her father, she tells him about the pair's seemingly inexplicable doings, and it is he who tips the press off to the philosopher, knowing that his ideas will be destroyed through the exploitation of publicity.

Sylvie and Pierre do, however, offer Lapoujade an opportunity to carry off one of the more original erotic scenes in recent memory. Instead of tumbling nude around a bed for the umpteenth time, our lovers are seen seated at the breakfast table, in bathrobes. They rise, embrace, he exposes her breasts and proceeds to bite them. The camera pulls back and he is slipping her panties from under her robe. Laughable? Perhaps, but there hasn't been a scene like that since *Un Chien Andalou*.